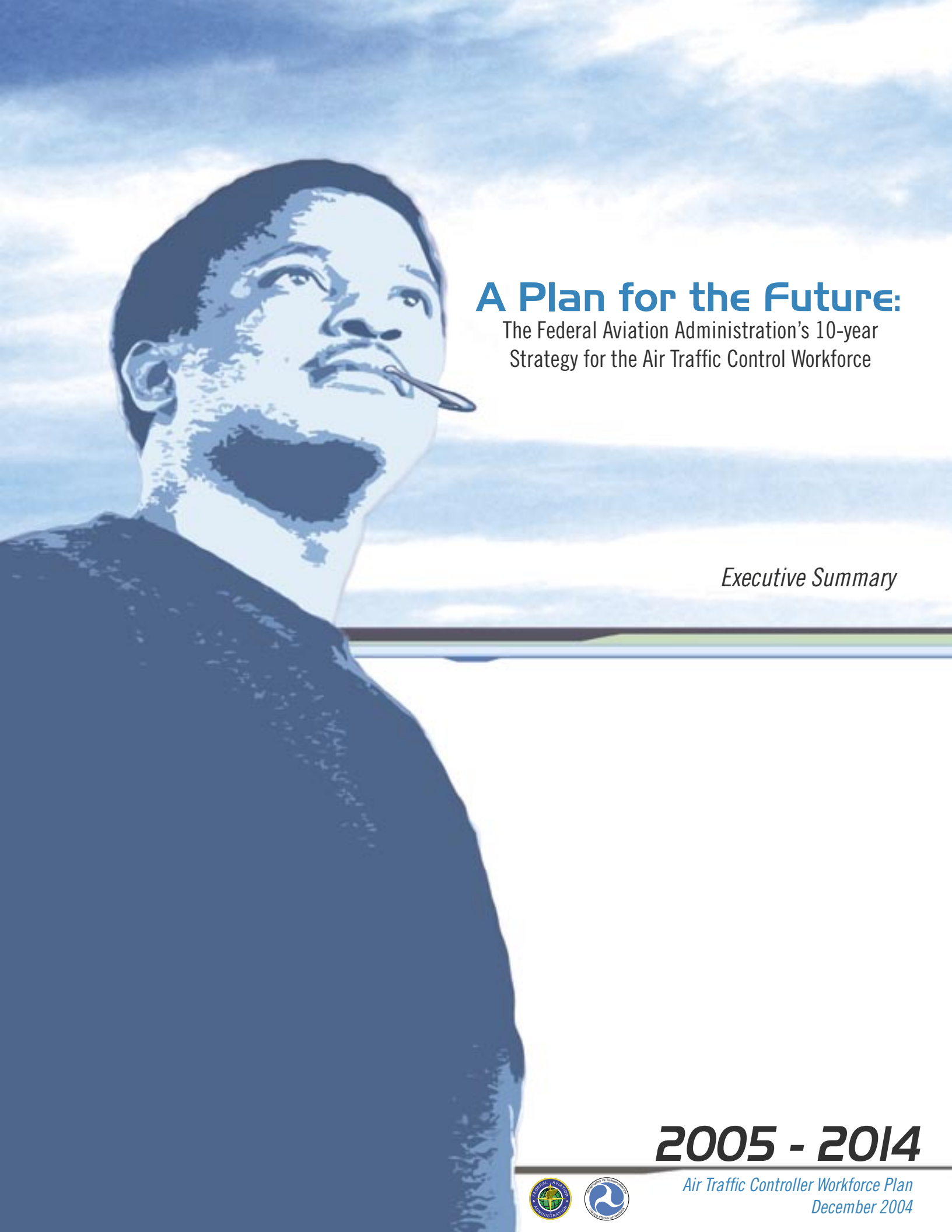


A Plan for the Future:

The Federal Aviation Administration's 10-year Strategy for the Air Traffic Control Workforce

Executive Summary

2005 - 2014

Air Traffic Controller Workforce Plan
December 2004

I. Introduction: Preparing for the Future

Operating the national airspace system involves managing a myriad of complexities from radar to regulations, from technology to takeoffs. The Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) air traffic control workforce is a key element that makes the system go.

Over the next 10 years, 73 percent of the agency's nearly 15,000 controllers will become eligible to retire. Total losses over the next 10 years are expected to be over 11,000. This report, *A Plan for the Future: The FAA's 10-Year Strategy for the Air Traffic Control Workforce,* is a blueprint that contemplates both retirements and appropriate staffing levels. Congress enacted Vision 100, the agency's four-year reauthorization, in 2003. Vision 100 required that a plan to ensure adequate staffing for air traffic control be completed by December 2004. This plan outlines the agency's plan to hire, staff, and train controllers as well as details efficiencies from cost savings to productivity improvements that will enable the agency to reduce our staffing requirements by 10 percent from existing requirements despite expected traffic growth. As we move forward, we will update this plan on an annual basis and make adjustments accordingly. With the approach outlined here, we are confident that we will be able to reach our goals.

II. Background: How We Got Here

In 1981, following a period of labor unrest, an overwhelming majority of the air traffic control workforce went on strike on August 3. President Reagan ordered those controllers to return to duty within 48 hours. When those 10,438 striking controllers did not return to work, President Ronald Reagan fired them on August 5. About 4,700 controllers remained on duty. Thereafter, the agency hired 5,643 controllers in 1982 and another 3,062 in 1983. From 1982 through 1991, the agency hired an average of 2,655 controllers per year. This hiring wave created the potential for a large portion of the controller workforce to reach retirement age at roughly the same time.

We are now entering that period.

The agency currently employs some 15,000 controllers. Even though historical trends indicate that only about 25 percent of controllers retire in their first year of eligibility, we know that about 73 percent of these men and women are likely to retire by 2014. The agency must hire 12,500 controllers over the next 10 years in order to have enough recruits in the pipeline to meet backfill needs. Coupled with normal attrition rates, it's clear that the agency's recent hiring policy for controllers – one retirement, one hire – will not be adequate to meet the challenge because of the time to train a new recruit and the fact that the system can only handle so many on-the-job trainees at any one time. We will monitor our hiring to ensure an appropriate ratio between fully certified controllers and those in training. It is essential that the FAA put a long-term solution in place that will effectively address the needs for staffing.

Following September 11, 2001, passenger numbers dropped markedly. Since then, passenger confidence in the safety and security of the system has been restored. The system continues to get busier by the day as traffic levels continue to rise. In fact, at 13 of the nation's 35 busiest airports, traffic levels already have exceeded pre-9/11 activity. Overall, more than 649 million passengers flew last year, and industry forecasts expect that number to increase considerably.

FAA controllers now staff some 315 federally operated facilities throughout the country, ranging from small towers to large air route traffic control centers. They guide aircraft that use 600 commercial airports and 3,300 smaller public-use airports. Since America's aviation system continues to expand, there's no question that we need to provide an adequate number of air traffic controllers to make it flow smoothly. But it's not a simple case of hiring to fill a slot. The plan contemplates new ways to make the best use of the taxpayer's investment. Each of the efforts described in this plan provides workforce flexibility, enhanced productivity and greater efficiency. Our current workforce will also benefit from greater job advancement opportunities, flexible work schedules, and better training.

The FAA intends to meet the needs of the system, staffing the right number of controllers in the right places at the right time.

III. Meeting the Challenge

Bringing aboard new controllers is a complex process. Controllers are highly skilled professionals and it takes several years to train a controller, so the pipeline must be filled with recruits and trainees in a deliberate, continuous fashion. Filling the job of a controller who retires today is the culmination of many steps that must by necessity have begun several years in advance. In the past, the process required three to five years. Through improvements in classroom training, increased use of high-technology simulators and more efficient on-the-job training, we expect to compress that process to two to three years. For the record, the agency's air traffic control academy can train approximately 2,000 controllers per year. Some 5,000 applications for controller positions are pending at the time of this report.

Hiring and Training

We're taking action to increase hiring efficiency. By improving the screening process, a nine-week screen has been reduced to an eight-hour test. Previously, screening cost the FAA about $10,000 per candidate, and the agency's air traffic control training academy experienced a 57 percent pass rate. Today, it costs the agency about $800 per candidate to administer the test. The new screening test combined with the academy's multi-path training referenced in Chapter 7 has reduced the failure rate for academy training to less than 5 percent, saving the agency money and establishing a more encouraging process for new recruits.

We're also using refined metrics to ensure a continuous flow in the controller trainee pipeline. By developing a national training database to monitor the training pipeline at each facility, we are ensuring that we have an acceptable ratio of trainees to certified professional controllers. Too few trainees means that the pipeline isn't full enough; too many and a backlog is created.

Greater efficiency in training procedures enhances our ability to staff appropriately. In light of the need to hire 12,500 controllers over the next 10 years, it's clear that we need to speed the training process.

The use of high-fidelity simulation plays a key role in our effort to optimize controller training time both at the FAA Academy and field facilities. When combined with enhanced training methods, simulation will increase student performance and reduce overall training time. We are committed to providing the most efficient and effective training possible to reduce cost, meet our staffing needs sooner, and advance the careers of our employees.

Staffing Efficiencies

While this plan is not a facility-by-facility projection of hiring needs, the FAA has established loss data at the facility level.

We will put in place better metrics to ensure that our facilities are staffed appropriately and that we have better estimates of staffing needs at each facility. The agency must establish the flexibility to move staffing for its control facilities to match the workload as it shifts from location to location. This will enable us to align staffing with workload much more precisely.

The agency also is staffing facilities according to peak traffic periods. Having too many controllers on duty during off-peak times makes little sense. In addition to right-sizing staffing, we're also reducing the hours of operation at our facilities where there is low or no activity, especially during the midnight to 5 a.m. shift. Newer approaches to staffing – such as split shifts and part time employment – also show promise. For example, split shifts allow controllers to work three or four hours to cover a peak workload, then leave and return later in the day, offering significant resource savings.

Better Management

Managing sick leave usage is important as well. Controllers typically use a greater percentage of sick leave as compared to other government employees. By 2006, the FAA's goal is to reduce sick leave usage by 8 percent by addressing sick leave abuse. This is equivalent to 73 controller positions.

The FAA has adopted a much more proactive approach to return disabled and temporarily medically restricted personnel to work. We're managing injury claims more closely, and we've increased training to managers and supervisors who oversee these claims. We've also put in place a system to track claims, the nature of the injury, and associated costs that result. As a result of these efforts to date, we've already reduced our worker's

compensation costs by $1.8 million, while the rest of the government's costs continue to rise.

We're also tracking official time (hours spent by bargaining unit representatives on the clock to conduct union business) much more closely. The FAA established an Official Time Task Force to identify strategies to reduce the use of official time FAA-wide. Further, the agency implemented the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) newest official time reporting requirements. Senior FAA management monitors official time usage on a monthly basis.

Following industry best practices, the FAA also is reclassifying several facilities with reduced traffic, which will allow us to pay new controllers a starting salary commensurate with activity levels at that facility.

IV. Challenges Ahead

There are a number of challenges ahead:

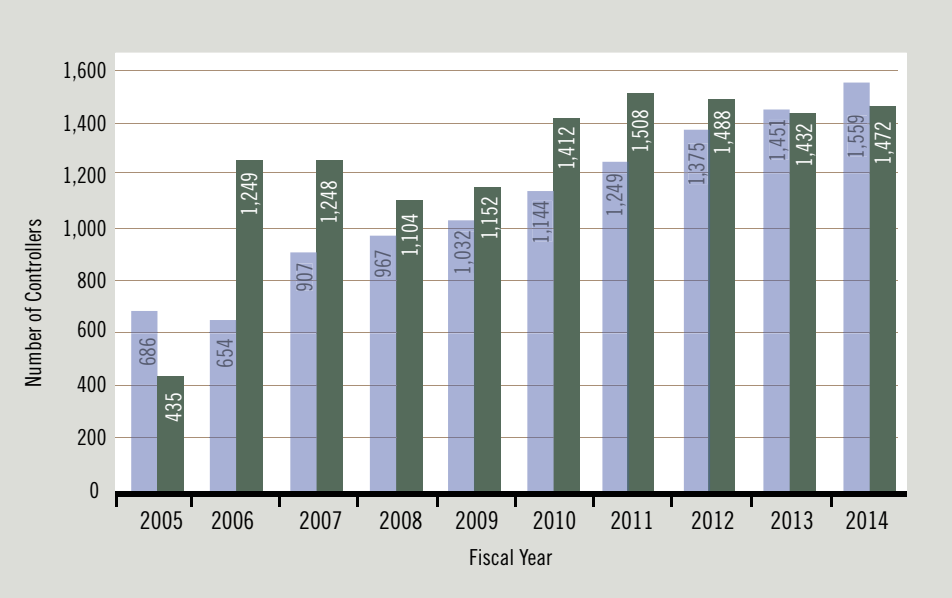
- Approximately 75 percent of the FAA's operational budget goes to payroll and benefits.
- The declining Aviation Trust Fund. Comprised largely of revenues from ticket taxes, this is the agency's primary funding mechanism. As the airlines move to smaller jets that carry fewer passengers paying lower fares, trust fund revenue shrinks while increasing the workload on controllers.
- The ability to deploy new technology. The FAA must continue to deploy new equipment to the field to accommodate this growth.
- Upcoming contract negotiations. The FAA will be negotiating a new contract with the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) in 2005.

V. Conclusion

The FAA will hire new controllers at a faster rate to offset the wave of retirements projected over the next 10 years. (*Planned hires in FY 2005 reflect actual appropriated funds for this fiscal year.)

This is the first in a series of annual reports to outline what will be evolving methodologies and management strategies to ensure the FAA has an adequate air traffic control workface to meet its future requirements. Many of the initiatives described in this report are currently being piloted or are in the initial phases of implementation. As a result, future annual reports will reflect revisions to the staffing requirements illustrated in this report and outline expanded initiatives by the FAA to improve productivity as the Air Traffic Organization (ATO) continues to evolve into a performance based organization. The FAA expects that many of the initiatives begun in 2004 and 2005 may have a significant impact on staff requirements outlined in its 2006 report.

By utilizing better methods to recruit, hire, train, and increase productivity, the agency will be able to staff its facilities to meet the needs of the national airspace system. We will have the right number of controllers in the right place at the right time.



Controller Planned Hires versus Estimated Losses